

A very good survey of family organization in
Caribbean area. Some of the weaker points:

- ① You cannot really approach the problem "in the Caribbean" without making some detailed studies, and then compare them
- ② In this paper you jump all over the place, there is very little independent thought. You have digested what authors have to say, but add little creative insight.
- ③ At times you sound ethnocentric, as if you, too, feel that stable family organization is indeed the "best" form of

SEX
MATERIALS
IN THE CARIBBEAN

western European

family organization.

A-

paper by Janet C. Schnierer
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In the Caribbean non-elite society, a range of mating forms exist as permanent or temporary alternatives which frequently characterize the domestic cycle. These alternatives which are culturally if not socially sanctioned, include single union, common law union and marriage existing in a multitude of forms simultaneously.

There are many factors influencing mating forms and resulting family structures: the degree of status differentiation, the intensity of land shortage, the proliferation of specializations, the amount of co-operative labor needed, the sex ratio resulting from the location of work opportunities, the channels for mobility, the criteria of status differentiation, the solidarity of the community, the cultural isolation, the integrity and nature of the previous culture brought to the sub-system, the foci of the contact situation, the bases for association, the legal motivations, the agencies of control, the influences of the church. We will define these mating forms and resulting family structures as they exist in several communities in the Caribbean. Several facts should be noted:

1. Marriage is recognized as monogamous, intended for life-long association with the husband liable for support and the debts of his wife.
2. Marriage and concubinage (common law union) are not regarded as alternative forms of conjugal associations between which one could choose. The existence of cultural alternatives does not negate the

fact that marriage is the core value in the Caribbean.

3. The "universal" cultural insistence, proposed by Malinowski, *reference?* that a girl be "married" before she gives birth to her children and that her illegitimate children be ascribed differential status is not valid in the Caribbean.

4. Matrifocality is a function of the incidence of non-conjugal or weakly conjugal family structures.

These facts will be discussed in greater length later.

The first type of single union entered upon is in casual mating which Henriques defines as the sexual congress without cohabitation or any intention to form a permanent relationship.

Most children begin their sexual careers shortly after puberty Careers? between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. Micheline Robillard in his studies in Guadeloupe has found that sexual instruction is extremely limited, in fact the mere subject is often taboo.¹ Although sexual activity is regarded as natural and desirable and "no woman who has not proved that she can bear children is likely to find a man to be responsible for her", girls are warned against sex play, discouraged from casual relations, and punished if pregnancy occurs. There is no social pressure for a girl to prove her fecundity.² Sexual curiosity is considered normal till adolescence. Due to overcrowdedness, the atmosphere is very open. Children learn by watching their parents or friends. In most rural communities where children do not attend school, there is little interaction or learning among children. In the home girls are constantly supervised and warned against contact with boys.³ In Judith Blake's sample most women reported that their first sexual contacts resulted from ignorance and naivete. They had little knowledge of sex and most often had no realization at all that intercourse could result in pregnancy. Most women felt pregnancy resulted when God wanted it to. Adolescent intercourse resulted in pregnancy in over half of the nonmarital first unions in her sample group. Blake hypothesizes that mothers intentionally withhold information to increase parental control and to put off their daughters' physical maturity.

This stems from their desire to keep their daughters with them as long as possible to aid with the housework and care for the younger children or in some cases to work outside of the household. Girls are taught to be dependent on the household. They lack any training of inner control and are extremely vulnerable and adapt poorly to new situations. Due to the strict confinement during childhood, girls are often lonely and seek comradeship. At adolescence it becomes more difficult to confine and supervise children. Children are constantly running errands or they may get jobs as domestics or dressmakers away from the household. Out of economic necessity children in adolescence are often dispersed to friends or relatives where a breakdown of control occurs.⁴.

Boys, in contrast, are not confined at home. They receive little sex instruction, but are warned against involvement in financially demanding sex relations.⁵ There is approval of early sexual experience for males since it proves his verility.⁶ Here the vicious circle comes into being. Parents guard their daughters against the depredations of other parents' sons while exerting little pressure on their own sons to respect other parents' daughters.⁷ The man accounts to no one for his behavior and can not be held responsible for pregnancy. There is no reprisal from the girl's family. Often the man will give the girl a little sum of money after union, but will never see her again. First unions are typically without continuity. Clarke reports that most girls are seduced by older men. In Jamaica intercourse with a virgin is rumored to be a cure for gonorrhoea.⁸ Although many men boast of having had numerous children, due to great mobility in most of these societies as a result of

unemployment, most men simply don't even wait around to see if there were any fruits to their labors.^{9.}

journalism!

When a girl becomes pregnant it is strictly her fault. The mother makes sure that everyone realizes the girl's misconduct was carried on without her knowledge. There is a noisy upbraiding, the girl is beaten and often turned out of the house.^{10.} The girl may take refuge with a neighbor or kinswoman. Eventually this neighbor or kinswoman will intercede with the mother who in turn will take the girl back in time for the birth of the child.^{11.}

The mother must now decide whether to recognize the boy or not. If he cannot support the girl and her child, the mother attempts to break off the relationship. Often the boy is still living with his parents who support him. He may be living with another woman also. If the father is an older man, she will encourage him to support the child. The mother will never encourage the girl to establish any kind of union since she feels the girl is too young and inexperienced. Also the correct formalities (i.e. courtship, etc.) have not been observed.^{12.}

The girl is now economically dependent on her mother. Several courses of action are open to her. She may continue to live with her mother, breaking all ties with her lover, if indeed any ties existed. Young women have an inordinate need of safety and freedom of responsibility and therefore often prefer this arrangement.^{13.} She may desire to establish a "housekeeper" domestic arrangement, to be discussed fully later, which

involves leaving her child with her mother. She may leave the child with her mother and establish a single domestic arrangement, working to support herself and her child. She may form a matrilocal union where she stays at home with her mother, but cooks for a man, sending the meals to his home, providing him with sexual services and washing his clothes in return for some economic support. She may terminate this relationship at any time.¹⁴.

Official legal

The status of the child at this point is dependent on the action of the father. If the father recognizes the child as his and gives it his name, the child will have legal privileges of inheritance although there is often discrimination as in Jamaica where the illegitimate recognized child can only inherit half of what he would inherit if he were legitimate.¹⁵. A father will often give a female child his name since there is little or no chance of inheritance. With children resulting from first unions, however, there is rarely any chance of recognition due to the casual nature of most of these unions.¹⁶.

The single woman must now involve herself in the courtship system if she desires to change her status. Goode defines all courtship systems as market or exchange systems. They differ from one another with respect to who does the buying and selling, which characteristics are more or less valuable in that market and how open or explicit the bargaining is. In the Caribbean a girl has little chance of being married at all unless she is willing to risk a union outside of marriage.¹⁷. A prevalent idea in the Caribbean is that a woman is only really a woman after childbirth; a man is only really a man after the impregnation of a woman.¹⁸. Henriques found

that there is an emphasis placed on demonstrated fecundity in Jamaica.¹⁹

The single mother, however, is at a distinct disadvantage on the market.⁹ Sixty percent of the women and eighty percent of the men in Blake's sample felt that children by previous unions hamper marriage. Few men are willing to support children by previous unions. Some women withdraw from the market for a few years, having been scorched during their first attempts at socialization. This accounts for a great part of the relatively low fertility rates in the Caribbean. Most women spend a good deal of their reproductive years after or between unions and unexposed to fertilization. Several beliefs tend to work against withdrawal to promote unstable unions and casual reproduction. There is a general belief in the naturalness of sexual relations and the need of sexual relations and childbearing for good health.²⁰

What are the alternatives open to the single mother? To free herself economically from her ^{own} mother, the girl may seek to establish a "housekeeper" domestic arrangement, mentioned above. This highly unstable union implies an even lower status for women than concubinage. She can have no outside children with her, can send no money such as she might receive, to her children. She is not trusted with any intimate knowledge nor can she claim any exclusive sexual attention. Contact with other men is ruled out.²¹

The single mother may be tempted to enter other unions. Due to quarrels or contention at home, she may be thrown out of the house or desire to leave. She may live and work away from home and as a result of pregnancy be left with no means of support. She may not want her parents to know of

her pregnancy. The need for economic help is the greatest single cause precipitating unions.²² Women who have children from unstable unions need support, but new mates threaten more pregnancies. Men feel that previous children are not really theirs. They must have children by present unions who they regard as guarantees of dependence and faithfulness.²³ There is no guarantee of conjugal stability or continued aid. Women who need help are easy marks. These types of forced common law unions generally have low status since they entail few acknowledged obligations and women enter them solely for support. A man may enter such a union to find a steady sexual partner (desired because they limit the chances of incurring infectious diseases), cook, and laundress. Men usually can not afford to pay two different women to fulfill their needs.²⁴

Aside from these highly unstable common law unions which are formed for the mutual fulfillment of needs, are those common law unions which may be called "limited partnership" relationships-understood and accepted as subcultural alternatives or leading to traditional "Western" marriage.²⁵

Consensual unions are not permitted as alternatives for marriage in all societies. The Andros Islanders, as studied by Otterbein, have a two-alternative mating system of marital and extra-marital unions. This is representative of a more fully structured society. Men are expected to have pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations since "it is a man's nature to have sex with as many women as possible. The man is expected to give presents and support any children resulting from these unions. The woman is expected to be faithful."²⁶

Likewise in Carriacou, the two alternative mating system is very strong and the resulting family forms are relatively stable. Men find that marriage is more permissible for them because in common law unions, women assert their rights and refuse to accept rivals. Women prefer nondomiciliary unions because they can still draw on their kin for aid and are free to accept proposals from other men. There are several fast rules that perpetuate this system: All men must marry; marriage is indissoluble; marriage is the only permitted form of cohabitation; women may not mate with two men simultaneously; men may not live with more than one mate under one roof. The system in Carriacou is traced back to the days of slavery when the majority of slaves belonged to one owner who encouraged slaves to marry. By working on the plantation, they could free their wives and children.²⁷ *Do you agree with this interpretation?*

In the case of the unstable common law union, it has been pointed out that many are entered into because of the need for economic aid of the single mother. Cohabiting males feel free in this situation to dissolve the union at any time or simply abscond in communities such as Sugartown in Jamaica and Kingston where there is high unemployment, a surplus of women, great mobility, and relative anonymity. In such unions men rarely keep children with them. Women often send children to live with rural relatives.²⁷ M. G. Smith maintains that the mating situation governs the form of the domestic system and provides the central principle of family structure. In such chaotic and unstable mating systems, resulting unions as well as marriages are brittle and easily dissolved. These

unstable domestic unions scatter the components of elementary families when these mating relations are dissolved.²⁸

M. G. Smith concludes that the persistence of high illegitimacy rates, unstable unions and anomalous forms of domestic groups are due to the same conditions, that is slavery when slaves were forbidden to marry, free to cohabit and have extraresidential mating systems. Children were considered the property of the mothers' owner and cared for exclusively by the mother. The later adoption of marriage norms into this dual system enhanced the instabilities by undermining such finality as consensual domestic unions had.²⁹ Under slavery the master, the authority figure, discouraged marriage because he desired to sell slaves separately, he wanted to keep slaves ignorant of any ideas that might make them rebellious and he wanted to make certain he had continued sexual access to slave women. The slave woman saw no advantage in marrying another slave. It was much better to be the concubine of a white man. This idea persists today. It is much better to be a white man's mistress than a black man's wife.³⁰ → just as a survival?

Herskovits in Trinidad Village feels that the effect of the new world system stripped the aboriginal African culture of its larger institutions leaving the more intimate elements of organizational living and a new balance between men and women. He sees extra-legal mating as a problem of acculturation in terms of selective borrowing. In the new world slave plantations it was impossible to maintain those fields of

male activity, such as clan and extended family important in Africa.

The male's functions as production manager, ritual leader, and jural head of lineage disappeared, leaving him a marginal and ineffective member of his family.³¹

The status of the children of unstable common law unions is very precarious. It is very unusual for children of former unions to be present. The current mate does not want to assume financial responsibility. The presence of outside illegitimate children is a stigma to social status. Women are jealous of their mate's children by another woman and are fearful of the step-father's interest in their girls.³² Children are usually dispatched to the woman's mother or in some cases aunt or sister.

These grandmothers willing^b/accept these children in most cases for several reasons. In societies where there is little upward social mobility and little stigma against illegitimacy, the presence of many children serves as social prestige. Women also look to their children as companions and as economic aids during the child's adolescence and for economic support in their old age.³³ As we have seen in the case of early pregnancies, these expectations seldom appear to be finalized. In fact very few households have parents living as their children's dependents.³⁴

This dispatching of children to grandmothers and the incidence of households containing grandmothers, mothers, and children mentioned earlier, gives rise to high rates of matrifocality.

R. T. Smith states that most all families are matrifocal beginning as domestic nuclear families, growing and expanding to common law unions and finally decaying into matrifocality. He feels that children derive little or nothing from their fathers who are marginal and ineffective members of their families. Matriarchy and marginality of men is characteristic of ascriptive stratification, low rates of social mobility, restricted public roles for adult men, absence of "managerial" functions, political responsibilities and status differentiation.³⁵

Value
judgment?

His view is largely unsubstantiated and generally disputed. Goode states that matrifocality is merely the result of the mother being left with the children.³⁶ Kreiselman defines matrifocality as the relative strength of the maternal over the paternal roles in the nuclear family. She found, however, no matrifocality in the structure of the stable conjugal family. Furthermore, the degree of stability was independent of their economic position or the role of the male partner in the community.³⁷ Robillard found in Guadeloupe that dominance is often related to status. A woman of a higher income bracket, or of a lighter color will hesitate before letting a dark man with no property or fixed income dominate her or her children.³⁸ There is a marked predominance of the mother as the main authoritarian figure in the household. Children resulting of unstable common law unions generally have the impression of paternal indifference, strictness if not harshness and outright neglect. They look to their mothers for security and some

permanence in human relations.³⁹ The mother or substitute mother figure (grandmother, aunt, sister) is the dominant figure in the child's life till adolescence.⁴⁰ Most children feel the mother is a sympathetic figure one can confide in and ask for help.⁴¹

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Common law unions in their finest form imply sexual exclusiveness and economic support. R. T. Smith in his analysis of family life among the Guianese and West Indian "Lower class Negroes" states that common law union and legal marriage are sociologically identical.⁴² Blake finds that this is true only if common law unions are stable, if people regard them as binding, and if offspring are treated as legitimate.⁴³ Henriques only goes so far to say that common law union is the union of a man and woman which lasts indefinitely without the full sanction of law.⁴⁴ Clarke refers to common law unions as a testing period of cohabitation before marriage. In her sample group, there was a general contempt of a couple who "just picked up themselves and married right off". During this testing period mates are tested for fidelity, discretion with respect to confidences, ability to cook and clean, forbearance to poverty, and familiarity with anyone who is not their equal (ambitiousness). In this type of "purposive concubinage" the union is entered into after a formal courtship in which the man promises both the girl and her parents to look after her as if she were his wife. This precludes sexual exclusiveness. The woman accepts the fact that she must contribute to the household budget. The man recognizes his obligations,

but resents a woman who makes too many demands.⁴⁵ Kreiselman in Martinique found common law unions desired before a formal commitment to marriage. Men wanted to make certain of their mates' fidelity and that she was the kind he wanted to be tied down with. Woman questioned their mates' stability and if they wanted their mates to have power over the children. There was no fear of raising children alone if the mate proved unacceptable. Everyone believed it was generally better to live in common law unions for many years than to marry hastily.⁴⁶

And what do you think?

Although common law unions do not always lead to marriage, of those lasting more than four years more than 40% resulted in marriage while the rest dissolved. Marriage is generally correlated with the attainment of the adult male role. It legitimizes the male as father, husband, and provider.⁴⁷ Marriage serves as an affirmation of stability putting a seal on a proven conjugal union. Most members of all classes eventually marry in or around middle age.⁴⁸ Marriage is closely linked with social and economic stability. Davenport states that "only socio-economic security enables a man to head his own household group and achieve a stable marriage". Married people, especially the wife, are accorded more respectability than people in common law unions, no matter how stable.⁴⁹

In Blake's sample group she found that 44 of 53 men and 81 of 98 women choose marriage unreservedly as the preferred type of union. Women felt that marriage provided a strong financial claim on the man. Marriage was more respectable. Inheritance rights were assured. One

should marry according to the religion. Children were better trained in the presence of a father. When women have all their children by one man, they can expect fidelity. Legitimate children have a better chance at social mobility. The men felt that women will take better care of men, the house and their children if they are married. You can trust the woman fully. It's more respectable. One can expect greater fidelity. Legitimate children have more opportunities. The religion requires it. The wife and children will inherit. Men aren't exposed to venereal diseases. Married men are more "steady". It's a good example for the children.^{49½}

In view of the majority preference for marriage especially among women, why do they not marry sooner than middle age? Several priests interviewed by Kreiselman gave the following reasons why people prefer to wait indefinitely: The climate is not conducive to marriage; man is hesitant to make woman his equal; men prefer to spend their money gambling; there is a general fear of the qualifying medical examination; men would rather have several women. The priests said they did not want to force the issue since those who were pushed into marriage made good subjects for adulterers. Adultery is considered far more sinful than concubinage. The people of Martinique were not very worried about the "fiery fate" waiting for them if they did not marry since most planned to marry in the future. They did not bother about the sinfulness of early unions because all that counts is the legalization of the final union. The "au lit de mort" wedding was always available as a last

resort. There was a basic fatalistic belief in predestination as already noted with regard to pregnancy. If God wills it, it will happen. A popular proverb is "God will not punish what must be or what is".⁵⁰

The Western ideal of marriage has so penetrated the Caribbean that it has become functionally tied to a specific set of social and economic attributes such as the costly validating feast, independent ownership of a house and household furnishings, male authority and the social role of the wife.⁵¹ Often the "real" reason given for not marrying is that one can't afford the obligatory feast. This feast costs about a year's wages and typically includes the purchase of a white dress for the bride, a suit for the groom, wine or rum and cake and a gold ring for the bride. In a culture that does not provide entertaining of large groups, this type of festival provides the only expression of solidarity. The feast is a sign of in-group membership in good standing. If one is not liked, the refusal to have a feast is a sign of alienation from the group. Only the destitute seemed truly not to have a yearly income acceptable to spend on a marriage festival. Also some people with adequate resources did marry without a festival.⁵² Another condition preventing or postponing marriage was the rule of neolocal residence and aid to parents. A couple is expected to live outside the parental home, independent of the parents. A man should own his own home and preferably his own land to propose. Housing and furnishings should be improved. He is expected to support his wife in a higher status than accepted for concubines. A married woman should not have to work.

Marriage indicates upward movement in the social scale, although it is not confused with elite status.⁵² Many couples prefer common law unions rather than face ridicule from a marriage that wasn't done "right".

Children of married parents whether born before or after the marriage are considered legitimate and receive full legal and social rights.⁵⁴

Marriage is strongly associated with male headship of the household. The man owns and controls the homestead and its land. He is responsible for the economic maintenance of the family, for the socialization and control of the young and care of the aged, and for the sexual conduct of childless young women staying with him. The man decides who may visit or stay in his household.⁵⁵ Men are obliged to accomodate kin or other issue of their resident mates. Men are more likely to accomodate unrelated children than their own illegitimate children. Men will often accomodate their daughter's illegitimate children, but rarely their son's illegitimate children. Usually wives will accept children their husbands have had before or during marriage if requested to do so.⁵⁶

Because marriage generally occurs late in life and women marry older men, widowship is common. Widows may remarry; but it is considered a backward social step for widows to enter common law unions. Men co-habit easily after marriage.⁵⁷

We have tried to show in this paper the reasons why the non-elite in the Caribbean have persisted in their deviation from Western marriage norms and the extent to which this deviation correlates with differences in the organization of the family. We have seen that a multitude of possible mating relations exists: the childless single people, the single parents, the consensually wed, the married people, and the widowed. The resulting family structures, single union, common law union, marriage and their variations, mirror this diverse mating system. Inherent in the plurality of parental and mating forms is instability.

Although conditions vary from community to community, several common features have been observed: Household heads are of either sex; Members can be differentiated by birth status; Individuals practice alternative forms of mating with differential parental roles in correspondence with these forms; Cohabitation is governed by neolocal rules of residence; There is a formal commitment to monogamy; Marriage occurs in or near middle age; There is a substantial number of single women of mature age most of whom are mothers and household heads; Legitimate offspring tend to live with both parents; The majority of offspring who live apart from their father or mother are illegitimate; The majority of offspring living apart from their parents live with the mother's kin.⁵⁸

The Caribbean faces severe problems of overpopulation and fragmentation. Attempts are being made to control overpopulation through birth control. Much progress has been made regarding diversification of crops in order to correct the inequities of land distribution and income. The tourist trade has been instrumental in the Caribbean as a spur to the economy, but especially in so far as it represents an infiltration of Western ideas. It remains to be seen within the social norms and patterns of behavior the extent to which public opinion will be effective in imposing and maintaining the accepted patterns of behavior in the society as a whole. 999

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